

Flowers of Italy's Gargano Peninsula

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Bari and transfer to Monte Sant'Angelo
Day 2/5	A daily programme of gentle botanical walks from our base in Monte Sant'Angelo
Day 6	Transfer to Peschici
Day 7	Botanical walks from Peschici
Day 8	Fly London



Departs

April

Focus

Plants, especially the region's wealth of orchids

Grading

Day walks only. Grade A/B

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ITA02) or brochure

Highlights

- Visit the Orchid capital of Europe
- Enjoy breathtaking displays of Orchids and other spring flowers
- Expect to find around 40 of the Gargano's 69 orchid species
- Enjoy beautiful scenery and excellent local food and wine



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N.B. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

The Gargano promontory appears as a 'spur' on the heel of Italy, a region of picturesque limestone hills cloaked with beech and oak forests which provide one of the richest botanical habitats in Europe. The relative abundance of orchids is just one feature of the impressive flora and this exciting Naturetrek tour will offer the opportunity to see dozens of species in the most glorious of settings.

Gargano has been populated since Paleolithic times but recent history dates from the region's conquest by the Romans, which led to the establishment of Siponto and Vieste as major Adriatic ports. However, with the fall of the Roman Empire, the drop in population and consequent reduction in agriculture allowed wilderness to invade land formerly preserved for cultivation. The cult of the Archangel Michael, said to have miraculously appeared at the end of the fifth century, helped stop this trend and Monte Sant'Angelo became an almost compulsory stop for pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land. New settlements followed and from the fifteenth century onwards the Gargano was continually split up among a number of feudal lords, including latterly the Grimaldis. This state of affairs continued until the Unification of Italy. In the summer, the coastline of the promontory, washed by the blue waters of the Adriatic, is a popular holiday area but in the spring, we will have it largely to ourselves.

Day 1

Monte Sant'Angelo

We will fly from London to Bari on a scheduled flight and from this arrival point on the Italian mainland we will travel north to the beautiful medieval town of Monte Sant'Angelo, 800 metres up on a ridge above the Adriatic on the southern side of the Gargano Peninsula. Our comfortable modern hotel is one kilometre away from the town, surrounded by flower-filled rocky terraces, with wonderful views of the Adriatic and the Gulf of Manfredonia far below. We will make this our base for the first five days. Depending on flight times, there may be time for some initial botanising en-route or around the hotel.

Day 2

Monte Sant'Angelo

As a gentle introduction to the plant life of the region we will spend this first day walking among the limestone hills near our hotel, our progress punctuated by frequent stops to examine the profusion of interesting flowers. The rich flora of the Gargano offers much for us to admire but of particular interest is the astonishing abundance of orchids, indeed well over 60 species have been recorded from the region, a remarkable total for such a small corner of Europe! The variety of species we should see today include masses of Pink Butterfly Orchid, *Orchis papilionacea*; the Sawfly Orchid, *Ophrys tenthredinifera*, *O. apulica*, the Gargano Orchid, *O. passionis var garganica*, the distinctive looking Bertolini's Orchid, *O. bertolonii*, *O. bertoloniiformis* and *O. sipontensis*, endemic to the Gargano Peninsula, together with another endemic, *O. promontorii*.

We will have our picnic lunch on a promontory overlooking the Adriatic, with wonderful views all around us and where we hope to find the endemic Goldendrop, *Onosma lucana*. The afternoon will be occupied by further exploration, walking down towards Santa Maria di Pulsano. On our way we should see masses of *Orchis italica* and we will also be looking at the rest of the typical rich Mediterranean flora, including *Cistus salvifolius*, *Helianthemum* spp, *Phlomis fruticosa*, *Salvia verticillata*, Woad and many others. At the end of the day, we will drive the short distance back to our hotel.

Day 3

Monte Sant'Angelo

Today we will drive inland to the Bosco Quarto, an area of outstanding beauty set amongst the striking limestone karsts and mixed forests of oak and hornbeam in central Gargano. Before entering the forest we will stop to see the beautiful *Iris pseudopumila* and *O. biscutella*. Once in the forest we will relax in the shade of the oaks and enjoy a welcome picnic lunch. As we eat our meal we may hear the plaintive mewing of Common Buzzards over the forest and those with an interest in birds will find the forest trails an interesting diversion as the oak wood residents include several species of woodpecker, Nuthatches and the quiet but spectacularly beaked Hawfinch.

After lunch we will set out for an exciting afternoon's botanising, first taking a circular walk under the forest canopy of fresh new leaves before moving out into the fields beyond. In the forest we hope to find the rather rare Bird's Nest Orchid (*Neottia nidus-avis*), the dark blue *Pulmonaria montana*, *Arum italicum*, carpets of *Anemone apennina* and then fields full of *Iris lutescens* in blue and some white forms, which add splashes of vivid colour to the landscape. After our exploration of the central region, and frequent roadside stops, we will make our way back to Monte Sant'Angelo.

Day 4

Monte Sant'Angelo

We will start this morning by climbing Monte Sacro to the ruined abbey of Santa Maria. As we climb up through the *Quercus ilex* evergreen oak forest, we will see *Orchis pauciflora*, Sparse-flowered Orchid and small drifts of *O. quadripunctata*, together with *Aristolochia rotunda* and *Geranium sanguineum* among others.

We will have our picnic lunch at the foot of Monte Sacro and then explore the many little fields full of orchids: the Lizard Orchid, *Himantoglossum hircinum* (which is unlikely to be yet in flower), three species of Tongue Orchid, *Orchis italica*, the Man Orchid, *Orchis anthropophorum* and we will look for the rare hybrid *Orchis x bivonae*. We will then have a beautiful drive along the coast, stopping to explore the coastal maquis where we should find *Cistus monspeliensis*, *C. creticus* and *C. salvifolius*.



Day 5

Monte Sant'Angelo

This morning we will take time to explore the town of Monte Sant'Angelo, and walk through its picturesque winding streets to visit the ancient church and crypt of St Michael. This fine old building is a major pilgrimage centre, representing the final European place of worship before embarking on the sea crossing to the Holy Land.

After lunch we will follow the pilgrims' route down an ancient trackway to the foot of the castle of Monte Sant'Angelo. Along this track we will see many typical Mediterranean plants and we will be particularly hoping to see the interesting hybrid *Ophrys incubacea x garganica*, as well as *Anemone hortensis*, *Vicia melanops* and *Silene italica* on a hillside bright with *Spartium junceum*.

Day 6

Peschici

Today it is time to leave Monte Sant'Angelo for our second destination, Peschici, on the north coast. Our route north takes a scenic road inland, botanising en route, leading us through the famous Foresta Umbra which covers 15,000 hectares (35,000 acres) high up in the centre of Gargano. Beeches are the most common trees, and some of the older individuals attain impressive proportions but there are also yews, maples, hornbeams and oaks.

We will stop before the forest for a walk through fields and lightly-wooded country. This is a good place to see *Narcissus poeticus*, banks of Green-winged Orchid, *Orchis morio*, the yellow *Ophrys sicula* and masses of the beautiful wild pansy, *Viola heterophylla ssp graeca* in both blue and yellow forms. After another al fresco picnic lunch in this beautiful spot we will drive on to the Foresta Umbra where we will stop to walk under the cool canopy and admire the trees. The woodland supports four species of woodpecker along with other typical forest inhabitants such as vocal Nuthatches and active little Marsh Tits. Another bird to look out for is the striking black and white Collared Flycatcher, newly returned from their African wintering grounds and busily engaged in spring courtship displays among the fresh green foliage of the forest giants.

We will hope to reach Peschici in the early evening, to give us time to explore this very attractive old town. An old fishing village, it is perched on a rocky cliff which drops sharply down to the sea. Little is known about its origin but legend puts its date at about 970 AD. Our hotel is beside the harbour and those with energy left can take a path directly behind the hotel up to the medieval castle which dominates the town and has wonderful views. Here we can reward ourselves with a drink before descending to our hotel for dinner.

Day 7

Peschici

This morning we will take the road along the beautiful, rugged north coast, lined with Aleppo Pines and Italian Cypresses, before turning inland to the Bosco di Spina Pulci, an area of mixed limestone grassland and impressive oak woodlands atop a range of limestone hills. This is a particularly rich locality for botanists and we will spend most of the day here. We will find large colourful pink patches of *Cyclamen repandum*, the Provence Orchid (*Orchis provincialis*) and huge stands of *Asphodelus aestivus*. We will also

look for *Serapias cordigera*, the endemic *Serapias apulica*, the distinctive *Ophrys parvimaculata* and *Orchis provincialis*. It is also a good place for the Fragrant Bug Orchid, *Orchis fragrans*.

If we have time, we will go to Pozzatina to explore Gargano's largest dolina. These are steep-sided depressions caused by the collapse of a cavern roof which are characteristic of limestone and seen all over the region.

Day 8

Fly London

Depending on the time of our flight home we may need to head back to Bari after breakfast or, if it is a later flight we may make a short excursion to a local bay or have some time this morning to explore the town or the wooded areas near the hotel. Plans will be left flexible so that the tour leaders can make appropriate decisions based on weather, group interests, and what we've seen thus far.



Tour grading

A/B. Day walks only but some of the botanical walks will be in hilly terrain.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this tour.

Weather

Mostly warm and sunny, however cooler and occasionally even cold conditions and the risk of precipitation are also possible during the capricious European spring! On occasions rainfall could be heavy and prolonged. A look at a long range weather forecast (for example on the BBC website) will aid packing.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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